

South-to-South Pathways Reshaping International Student Mobility: The Case of Malaysia

Mayumi Ishikawa

This article examines South-to-South pathways of international student mobility through a case study of three international universities in Malaysia. It argues that religious, ethnic, and regional ties are strategically leveraged to create alternative education pathways beyond conventional East–West or South–North binaries. The study illustrates how the internationalization of higher education is being rearticulated beyond Euro-American models, highlighting the increasing visibility and influence of actors in the Global South.

An increasing number of international students are choosing destinations in the Global South. Drawing on three international universities in Malaysia, this article examines how religious, ethnic, and regional ties are leveraged to create alternative pathways for international student mobility beyond the conventional East–West or South–North binaries. As an emerging hub of international education in Asia, Malaysia offers affordable, culturally and religiously engaged international education, particularly for students seeking options closer to home.

South-to-South educational mobility is not new but has received limited scholarly attention due to assumptions that frame Western destinations as inherently superior. Such assumptions fail to acknowledge the significant contributions of South-to-South educational mobility to human capital and professional development for growing middle-class families across Asia Pacific and students from less privileged backgrounds. The internationalization of higher education is increasingly rearticulated by local and regional needs and priorities, while the global higher education landscape is rapidly evolving, with institutions and actors in the South gaining visibility and influence.

This article focuses on three transnational undertakings: a university focused on Muslim human resource development and alliance building; a Chinese branch campus serving ethnic Chinese communities in Malaysia and beyond; and a provider of private medical education, provided through bilateral cooperation. These three institutions constitute a distinct infrastructure of South-to-South mobility, providing a viable alternative to dominant West-bound mobility models.

Malaysia as a Strategic Destination

As traditional destination countries in the West increasingly regulate international student inflows, many governments and institutions in East and Southeast Asia maintain welcoming

policies. Malaysia has emerged as a prominent player by actively hosting international branch campuses, particularly from the UK and Australia. Its socioeconomic stability, wide usage of English, and relative affordability make the country attractive to students and families in the South. Its Muslim majority population, multiethnic society, and Commonwealth ties further enhance its diversity.

The study discussed here examined three transnational institutions in Malaysia: 1) International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), a public national university; 2) Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM), the first overseas branch campus of a leading research university in China; and 3) Manipal University College Malaysia (MUCM), a provider of private medical education through bilateral Indian and Malaysian collaboration. Each institution was facilitated by respective ethnic communities within Malaysia. Despite differences in size, structure, and history, all three are grounded in cross-border mobility of people and knowledge, reflecting deepening relationships outside the Global North. Although linked to specific ethnic constituencies, they recruit students and faculty well beyond the ethnic communities they represent.

Faith-Based Internationalization and Its Constraints

Established in 1983 by the Malaysian government and cosponsored by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, IIUM is a pioneering international Islamic university, as the only public institution in Malaysia where English and Arabic are mediums of instruction. With more than 26,000 students, IIUM offers programs ranging from Islamic studies and law to science, engineering, and medicine, integrating all with Islamic studies.

As of May 2024, IIUM had produced over 116,000 alumni, approximately 16 percent of whom are international and represent 134 countries and territories. About half are from Asia,

with significant representation from Africa and the Middle East. Major sending countries include Indonesia, Bangladesh, Singapore, Thailand, Nigeria, India, and Yemen. The university also enrolls students from Muslim-minority countries and conflict-affected areas such as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Palestine.

IIUM has contributed significantly to capacity building among Muslim communities in the Global South. However, international student numbers have declined, from around 7,000 in 2018 to approximately 2,700 in 2024. Faculty attribute this decline to reduced financial support, increased competition, and sponsors' preference for higher-ranked universities. IIUM thus illustrates both the potential and constraints of inclusive internationalization.

Supporting and Moving beyond the Diaspora

Opened in 2016, XMUM is the largest overseas university branch campus in Malaysia and the first comprehensive offshore campus of a Chinese public university. It provides a reputable higher education pathway for ethnic Chinese communities in Malaysia and the neighboring region, supported by local and international Chinese communities, businesses, associations, and citizens. English is the primary language of instruction, except in selected programs.

Enrollment has expanded rapidly, with projections of 10,000 students by 2027. The target student balance is 60 percent local, 20 percent mainland Chinese, and 20 percent from other international backgrounds. While the campus has a distinctively Chinese cultural flair with large cohorts of ethnic Chinese students, XMUM is enhancing recruitment efforts in Central Asia, East Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

As a nonprofit institution, XMUM offers scholarships that help diversify its student body and recruit qualified students. The university showcases how diaspora networks and cultural affinity are mobilized to establish alternative education pathways beyond Western destinations.

Institutionalizing South-to-South Professional Training Pathways

MUCM specializes in medical education and is smaller in size, albeit with a considerable social impact. Established in 1997 as Melaka Manipal Medical College, it originally offered twinning programs with its parent institution in India, which had long trained Malaysian doctors. According to the university, Manipal has produced more than 10,000 doctors since its inception, meaning almost 20 percent of registered doctors in Malaysia are

Manipal graduates. It has also provided access to medical education for students unable to enter competitive public programs, including ethnic minorities.

Today, MUCM offers English-language medical, dental, and health science degrees. As of 2024, approximately 14 percent of its 1,762 students were international, primarily from India and Sri Lanka, Commonwealth countries with similar national medical licensing systems. About one-third of its full-time academic staff came from India. Following its transition to university college status, MUCM became an autonomous private institution incorporated in Malaysia, owned by an Indian company. Students no longer need to complete part of their training in India, and the institution can recruit students directly from India due to formal degree recognition by Indian authorities.

Faculty and student accounts highlight rigorous training, the faculty's strong English proficiency, and the intensity of lectures. MUCM also supports preparation for medical licensing exams such as those in the UK and the US. Manipal's extensive alumni network further facilitates graduates' career placement and mobility. MUCM represents a longstanding model of South-to-South cooperation in professional education.

Conclusion

These three institutions do not conform to the typical East-to-West mobility or knowledge transfer from North to South. Instead, they offer reputable, culturally engaged higher education that responds to ethnoreligious sensitivities while cultivating ties with national and regional economic and professional networks. Their mobility patterns reflect each institution's niche market and outreach through ethnic, cultural, and religious ties; common social and educational frameworks; and growing higher education demands in neighboring regions.

They indicate that Malaysia is not merely a lower-cost substitute for Western education but a rational destination in its own right. They also serve as a reminder that, within a global hierarchy that privileges Western elite degrees, while some students view Malaysia as a strategic alternative, for others it remains a pragmatic "second choice."

Above all, the Malaysian case demonstrates that international student mobility is increasingly multilateral. The expansion of higher education opportunities in the Global South calls for broader discussions of internationalization that transcend Euro-American centrism and North-South binaries. As alternative destinations such as Malaysia thrive, they reshape the geography of global higher education, creating new pathways for students worldwide.

Mayumi Ishikawa is professor emeritus and affiliated researcher at the University of Osaka, Japan. Email: ishikawa.mayumi.cgin@osaka-u.ac.jp

This paper is based on her chapter in [The Future of Cross-Border Academic Mobilities and Immobilities](#), edited by Aline Courtois, Simon Marginson, Catherine Montgomery and Ravinder Sidhu. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025.

